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The Cold War And The Direct Approach  
Of  
"The Politics of Strength"

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"It has been our conviction that if economic recovery could be brought about and public confidence restored in Western Europe - in other words if Western Europe could be made the home of a vigorous, prosperous and forward-looking civilization - the Communist regime in Eastern Europe would never be able to stand the comparison and the spectacle of a happier and more successful life just across the fence would be bound in the end to have a disintegrating and eroding effect on the communist world."

-George Kennan 1948

In 1947 the Cold War broke out over which system - the American democratic, capitalist system or the Soviet Union's communistic command economy - would reshape Europe and the world. In that year, with its brutal imposition of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union made patently clear that it had no intention of acceding to the United States' postwar vision for Europe and the world. However, forty-three years later the Cold War seems to have come to an end with the Soviet Union removing its "iron curtain" from Eastern Europe and last week's historical reuniting of the two Germanies.

Has the Cold War really been won as so many politicians and commentators would have us believe, and, if so how? My basic contention in this paper will be that the West has won the Cold War battle of the two antagonistic political/economic systems in Eastern Europe, though not yet in the Soviet Union, and that this "partial" victory has been achieved via a direct, albeit non-combative, approach that has centered on the "Politics of Strength."

With hindsight we can see that a direct "hot" war was never a feasible way for the United States to achieve its

victory in the Cold War. To begin with, at the outbreak of the Cold War in 1947, the United States was in no military position to force its will on the Soviet Union in Europe. Hoping for the proverbial peace dividend, we had engaged in headlong demobilization. At the end of the war, the U.S. armed forces stood at 12 million but had plummeted to 1.6 million by 1947. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, possessed indisputable conventional superiority in Eastern Europe, which the United States was not in a position to challenge. Subsequently, with the USSR's possession of nuclear weapons, the "balance of terror", as Churchill called it, rendered direct military confrontation between the United States and the USSR essentially unthinkable since there could be no guarantee that direct warfare between the two countries would not escalate into a nuclear Armageddon.

The Cold War was thus "cold" because a direct "hot" war between the United States and the Soviet entailed possibly catastrophic costs. The United State's and NATO's passivity to the brutal suppression of domestic uprisings in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 was vivid testimony that the West intentionally shied away from direct military confrontation in Europe with the USSR.

Having dismissed the possibility of winning the Cold War with a direct approach involving combat, it is tempting to argue that the West won its "partial" Cold War victory via an indirect approach such as outlined by the British military strategist B.H. Liddell Hart. However, I find it difficult to marry what

happened in the Cold War with Hart's indirect approach for two reasons. First, Hart espoused the strategy of indirect approach primarily as a tool of combative war. The Cold War drama that played itself out primarily in Europe was notable in that it was devoid of any direct fighting between West and East. Second, Hart stressed concepts such as "exploiting the lines of least resistance and expectation", "attacking the rear", and surprise tactics in dealing with the enemy, but one is hard-pressed to find examples of such round-about tactics pursued by the West vis-a-vis the Soviet Union in Europe, the main focus of the Cold War.

In my view, in the Cold War the United States and its allies followed a very blunt direct approach, albeit one that fell short of direct military confrontation with the Soviet Union. This direct approach was, as the first West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer called it, the "Politics Strength".

The "Politics of Strength" involved a fundamental recognition by the United States that its postwar prosperity would depend on a revitalized Western Europe and that it could ill-afford to retreat again into semi-isolationism. It had two main components: containment of Soviet expansionism and turning Western Europe into a potent political/economic magnet as George Kennan envisioned in 1948 which could act upon the Achilles heel of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: extremely inefficient and unproductive command economies. The combination of these two factors eventually wore down the Soviet Union and led it to jettison its resource-draining Eastern European cordon sanitaire.

The "Politics of Strength" recognized that the Soviet Union's only real long-term strength was military power. Soviet expansion had to be checkmated, foremost at its "center of gravity" in Eastern Europe. Without a U.S. security blanket, Western Europe, psychologically and materially devastated by the effects of World War II, could not be rebuilt and revitalized. Via direct action (e.g. forward deployment of U.S. troops in Europe, the creation of NATO and nuclear deterrence), the United States deterred for over 40 years any possibility of Soviet expansion into Western Europe. The Soviet Union was certainly never in the fog regarding our direct containment policies in Europe.

The economic revitalization of Western Europe (and Japan) was also a straightforward policy of the United States. Unlike after World War I when we kept our tariffs high but insisted on war debts being paid back by the Europeans, we moved after World War II to extend unprecedented economic assistance to the Europeans via the Marshall Plan and to keep our markets open to them. We strongly supported the creation of the European Community as a way to enhance the magnetic strength of Western Europe. Meanwhile, we created a whole host of international economic institutions (e.g. International Monetary Fund, World Bank, the OECD) aimed initially at the rebuilding of Europe. The Soviet Union was excluded from these bodies and left to wallow in its morass of Communist autarky. This international capitalistic framework brought Western Europe, the United States and the rest of the West unprecedented economic prosperity and technological

innovation over four decades and left the Soviet Union and its Eastern European empire in the economic dust.

The stepped-up "Politics of Strength" followed by the Reagan Administration and NATO in the first half of the 1980's ended up delivering the unanticipated coup de grace to Communism in Eastern Europe. In a direct reaction to the Soviet Union's tremendous military build-up of the 1970s and its aggression in Afghanistan, President Reagan launched the biggest ever peacetime U.S military build-up with a significant high-tech component (i.e. SDI). This came at a time when the Soviet command economy began to stagnate as its "extensive" growth based on using ever greater quantities of people, capital and land on large-scale projects without regard to cost became no longer feasible. In order to meet the U.S. military build-up, the Soviet Union would have had to devote an even greater share of its flagging economy to defense spending. (Note: at the beginning of the 1980's, the USSR's economy was only one-third the size of the United States but Soviet defense expenditures accounted for a whopping 25% of its GNP compared to only 6-7% in the United States). Hence, I believe that Gorbachev initiated glasnost and perestroika to modernize the Soviet Union's disastrous economy and to keep the USSR from become irrelevant in the world. This necessitated, among other things, getting rid of its tremendous resource-draining Eastern Europe empire.

In summary, the West's direct approach of the "Politics of Strength" ended up exhausting the Soviet Union's inefficient command economy, thereby undermining its ability to increase

military expenditures or meet the West's technological challenge. However, as I stated at the beginning, I believe it is more prudent to say that the West has won a "partial", not "total" victory in the Cold War. Even though the Soviet Union has given up its Eastern European empire, it has not submitted to unconditional surrender at the West's feet. Although hurting economically, the USSR remains a one-party Communist state and military super power. As such, it has not accepted the Western vision of world order and continues to be the only country in world that has the capability to threaten the United States' national survival. If the Soviet Union were to evolve one day into a democratic state with a market economy, then a full victory in the Cold War could be declared. However, like Lenin, Gorbachev and the Soviet leadership may still be aiming at achieving "socialism in one country" by reforming and modernizing the Soviet Union economy without weakening the country's authoritarian government. In view of the latter possibility, the West's direct approach of "Politics of Strength" should not be abandoned.